

In addition to funding operations and capital improvements, the Amtrak bill also addresses the congestion experienced on so many of the system's routes. By law, Amtrak passenger trains have the right of way over private freight trains, but this preference is often ignored. The bill the Senate passed today permits the Surface Transportation Board to assess fines against non-compliant freight railroads and to distribute damages to Amtrak. Congestion has increased in recent years, especially along the Northeast Corridor, and this provision should lead to fewer and shorter delays for passengers.

Finally, let us celebrate a piece of good Rhode Island news—I have been informed that the escalators in the Providence train station, which have been broken and covered with dust since early 2005, are scheduled to be reopened and in service by the week of November 12.

I congratulate Senators FRANK LAUTENBERG of New Jersey and TRENT LOTT of Mississippi on the passage of this critical piece of legislation. I also want to recognize the contributions of Rhode Island's own Senator JACK REED, who has been a strong and constant advocate for Amtrak. The new resources and clear development plan outlined in this bill reaffirm Congress's commitment to passenger rail service in the United States.

MATTHEW SHEPARD ACT OF 2007

Mr. SMITH. Mr. President, I wish to speak about the need for hate crimes legislation. Each Congress, Senator KENNEDY and I introduce hate crimes legislation that would add new categories to current hate crimes law, sending a signal that violence of any kind is unacceptable in our society. Likewise, each Congress I have come to the floor to highlight a separate hate crime that has occurred in our country.

In the early hours of October 19, 2007, a 28-year-old man was shot at allegedly because of his sexual orientation. The victim and a friend left a gay bar in Midtown Atlanta, GA, for a gas station down the street at about 3 a.m. At that time, a sport utility vehicle with three men inside pulled into the gas station's parking lot. One of the vehicle's passengers was allegedly intoxicated and complaining to customers about the number of gay people at the gas station, using antigay epithets. Some of the man's behavior is caught on surveillance tapes at the station. The victim and his friend began to walk back to the bar after a short stay at the gas station and were followed by the men in the vehicle. As they walked by the bar, the man who appeared intoxicated shot at them four or five times, grazing the victim with a bullet that had ricocheted off the building. While Georgia does not have a hate crime law, the shooting is being investigated as an antigay incident.

I believe that the Government's first duty is to defend its citizens, to defend them against the harms that come out of hate. The Matthew Shepard Act is a symbol that can become substance. I believe that by passing this legislation and changing current law, we can change hearts and minds as well.

FIRES OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA 2007

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, over the past 2 weeks, residents of San Bernardino, San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, Riverside, and Santa Barbara counties in southern California have faced some of the most horrific wildland fires in California's recorded history. At one point, as many as 1 million Californians were forced from their homes and communities by flames driven by Santa Ana winds of up to 100 miles per hour.

To date, 14 people have lost their lives, almost 3,000 structures, two-thirds of them homes, have been destroyed and more than 500,000 acres have burned. Over 100 people have been injured, some seriously. The consequences to people's lives will be long term, and we will do everything we can to bring comfort to victims and regeneration to affected communities.

Throughout these fires, which are only now being subdued, thousands of firefighters, mostly Californians, but some from other States, have been on the front lines working around the clock to defeat the fires. They have been tireless and fearless. We owe these California firefighters, and those who traveled across the country, our deepest thanks and appreciation. Whether it was saving the lives of people in the path of the flames, or making a stand to protect a neighborhood or a whole town, these brave men and women were there selflessly doing their duty. CalFire, the California National Guard, county and local fire agencies worked tirelessly to get the job done.

Thankfully, there has been no loss of firefighter lives, though several of our firefighters were injured, and to them I send my best wishes for a full recovery.

I hope that today we all can recognize our firefighters' valor and steadfastness in the face of the threat. We must also commit ourselves to standing up for their health and welfare as they face health challenges that sometimes last a lifetime. They do a very difficult job and we must do everything possible to assure they have all the support necessary so that they can continue to be there when the next threat presents itself.

SOMALIA

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, I have come to this floor many times over the years to urge increased U.S. attention and resources to Somalia. Meanwhile, the United States and the international community at large have continued to respond sporadically and

clumsily to the steady deterioration of Somalia's security, humanitarian, and political situations. In January, I said that we had only a very limited window to establish the conditions necessary for stability in Somalia and the volatile Horn of Africa region, but I fear that opportunity may soon be lost. Events over the past few days suggest that strong but inclusive leadership is needed now if Somalia is to avoid the worst descent into chaos of its tumultuous history.

This weekend saw a massive setback in Somalia's security and humanitarian situation as a fresh outbreak of fighting which aid workers describe as the worst violence in months—forced tens of thousands more Somalis from their homes in Mogadishu. Most of these people are seeking refuge in communities whose coping capacities are already at the breaking point due to the strain of providing food, water, protection, shelter, and basic services to more than 300,000 existing internally displaced persons. Some of the newly displaced have fled to areas where there is little or no access by humanitarian agencies.

Forty of these aid organizations that are operating against all odds in Somalia released a statement yesterday highlighting the dramatic deterioration of the humanitarian situation and their increasing inability to effectively respond due to security and access constraints. They are calling on the international community and all parties to the present conflict to demonstrate a commitment to protect civilians, to facilitate the delivery of aid, and to respect humanitarian space and the safety of humanitarian workers. I want to take this moment to honor the courageous individuals and their sponsoring organizations for their persistent service to the innocent civilians most affected by the ongoing instability in Somalia and to echo their appeal for concerted action to support their work and the broader objective of peace for Somalia.

Amidst this dark backdrop there is a glimmer of hope for progress. On Monday, the embattled Foreign Minister of Somalia's fragile transitional federal government, Ali Mohamed Gedi, resigned amid feverish political infighting. Since its formation 3 years ago, the TFG has suffered from a lack of public legitimacy due to its inability to effectively represent and provide security and services to the Somali people. The appointment of a new Prime Minister is likely to be the last chance for this transitional government to restore some credibility and move forward with political reconciliation. I encourage all parties to seize this opportunity for progress towards a solution to the country's deepening crisis.

In January, I warned that without concerted international and national action, Somalia could deteriorate into what it has been since the early 1990s—a haven for terrorists and warlords and a source of crippling instability in a